

FRONT-YARD GARDEN

Venetia Cotter

Writer's comment: I took English 104C (Journalism) to learn how to write articles for gardening magazines. When assigned to write a profile piece, I was at a loss for a subject. Jayne Walker helped me to see that my experience with my own garden was a story worth telling. As the writing progressed, her insightful criticism was invaluable. I am grateful for that garden. It was my personal growing-ground. I made friends with plants, as well as with people. There, I dreamed my dreams and was inspired to return to college to study horticulture. In telling the story of its creation, the garden provided wonderful material. In writing the piece for Jayne's class, the learning experience was equally valuable.

— *Venetia Cotter*

Instructor's comment: Venetia Cotter came into English 104C with a clear purpose: an urban horticulture major, she wanted to write articles for gardening magazines. She studied those markets, which I had never explored, and worked hard to forge a straightforward journalistic style that was supple enough to accommodate moments of poetic perception. "Front-Yard Gardening" is a beautiful piece. Written with hard-won simplicity, it's alive with images, and brimming with information about the possibilities of front-yard gardening. Venetia's article on school gardens was also among the top scoring essays in this year's *Prized Writing* competition. I'll look forward to reading more of her work in gardening magazines.

— *Jayne Walker, English Department*

They were out there almost every day. Not always the same ones. Once, a line of preschoolers came by. Holding hands in twos, name tags swinging from bright bits of yarn, they stopped and turned with military precision. Wide-eyed, they peered through the bars of the wrought iron fence to watch.

This time, I looked up to see a mom and two little girls. I was pruning the lavender. “Hi! What’s this spiky green stuff? Look, little blue flowers!” As I broke off a prickly, pungent sprig of rosemary and held it out to them, I had to smile. I’d made a lot of friends while working this bit of ground. I was about to make three more.

My front-yard garden didn’t grow friendships in the beginning. I still hear the disbelieving voices of my neighbors, on the day I marched out to do murder with a pitchfork and shovel. “You’re going to do *what?* Take out the *lawn!*”

The Lawn: icon of gracious living, verdant goddess of suburban virtue. Gardeners pay weekly homage to it. Teen-age sons are indentured to it. Nothing spells success quite so well as that unwalkable surface of emerald velvet fronting a house. The lawn marks the difference between Us and Them. What would happen to a nice neighborhood if someone just up and decided to rip out the front lawn?

Questions hung in the pale winter sunshine. My neighbors eyed me, wincing each time a shovel full of turf flew into the wheelbarrow. They stood huddled together, a tight little group, outlined against a row of neat, surgically-manicured patches of green. They looked anxious.

They were good people. Hard-working. Responsible. They tended their yards, their cars and their children with equal effort. Their homes were their security, both financial and emotional. The trim stucco houses and well-groomed lawns of our neighborhood told them all was well with the world. They didn’t want that to change.

Bob stepped out of the huddle. He had appointed himself official spokesman. He faced me squarely, bald head gleaming on his thick neck. He stood with arms folded, lips stiff with disapproval. “We had hippies living around the corner,” he barked, “a few years before you moved in. They tried something like this. Planted corn. The place looked like a damned commune. Didn’t work out.”

They were afraid. I could see that. It was too different. Still, I was certain that it would work out. I envisioned an attractive front garden. Herbs and roses, a bird-bath, perhaps, and a bench would replace the lawn. I hoped people would see that their fears were groundless once the garden was planted.

I found a way to ease the tension. Drawing a new plan, I surrounded the front yard with a white wrought-iron fence. I laid out the beds in a geometric design. These features gave a bow to tradition. They preserved the neat simplicity of the street. Mollified, my neighbors began to relax, even as I put the first transplants into the ground.

Passersby began to stop while I planted. I didn’t think about it much at the time. I worked steadily, watering and weeding. They said a few words, sometimes curious, sometimes complimentary. Before long, they were leaning over the fence to talk, smell the new roses, ask questions.

A fragrant herb garden soon filled the space in front of our house. Rosemary, thyme and scented geraniums surrounded the verdigris sundial. A park bench sent a mute invitation. Mint and lemon balm were heady in the summer air. Hummingbirds darted among purple spikes of lavender.

Neighborhood cats eyed the birds. Declaring a truce, they had taken up residence in the leafy shade of a podocarpus. Mah-tu, a grand, fluffy white Persian, crouched among the hyssop. His pose recalled leonine ancestors. The tips of his ears, just visible above the upright branches, twitched occasionally at the humming of bees overhead.

Bees were everywhere in the garden. They floated on the warm updrafts and hovered in formation over green mounds of germander. These apian visitors scared me. Carpenter bees, huge and black, buzzed

me straight into the house. Honey bees had me sprinting for the door, heart pounding.

One headlong dive for the porch drew raucous laughter. “Well,” Bob chuckled, noticing my red face. “Anyway, this place is good for a laugh.” While still skeptical, he grudgingly conceded that at least I hadn’t planted corn, following with the announcement that his daughter had just given birth to Sarah, his new grandchild.

Children were fascinated by my front yard. They often stopped on their way home from a nearby park. We picked different leaves and handed them around, comparing texture, color and scent. I taught them to tell time on the sundial. They met the bright green spiders that lived in the yellow rose.

As the kids’ interest grew, their parents considered planting family gardens. Soon, families routed their walks to pass our gate. A brown-haired dad with earnest blue eyes queried, “Are you the garden lady? My boys said to ask you what to plant.” The young couple pushing matching blue strollers said they just came to get ideas.

People pulled their cars to the curb and hopped out, engines running. I once looked up to see an out-of-breath smile and a pair of sunglasses. “Wow, I’ve heard about this place. I just had to stop.” Tan arms gestured expansively. “You’ve got something great here. It works. It really does.”

Yes, my garden did work out. It worked out so well, in fact, that the entire neighborhood took personal pride in it. People had begun to emulate it. Some came to ask for cuttings. They made their own changes. A lavender border edged a drive. A waterfall of prostrate rosemary cascaded from a planter box.

Ideas blossomed from such small changes. Xeriscaping was becoming popular. Three more people actually removed their turf. In one drought-tolerant planting, a dry creek of river-rock wound its way through native perennials. Another front garden featured an old-fashioned wood glider-swing under a vine-covered trellis.

My own garden continued to flourish. The neighbors came often. Smiles had replaced their worried frowns. Bob tumbled the walls of Jericho one morning when he brought his granddaughter to see the hummingbirds. Tiny Sarah said her first word there. “Kitty,” she pronounced. She stroked a furry leaf of peppermint geranium and nodded, brown curls bobbing. Laughing, she repeated, “Kitty.”